

School Counselors and Principals:
Partners in Support of Academic Achievement

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Educational reform has sharply focused on the mission and functions of public education (National Commission on Excellence in Education 1983; National Science Foundation 1983; Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills 1991). School counselors have been conspicuously absent from educational reform reports and are often viewed as peripheral to the main function of schooling and academic achievement. Recent efforts to bring school counselors into the mainstream of educational reform propose that future school counselors become leaders of efforts to improve teaching and learning and to advocate for equal opportunity and access to a quality education for all students (House and Martin 1998). Key to the school counselor's new leadership role will be an alliance with the principal.

School counselors and principals can act as powerful allies in school reform focusing on helping students access and be successful in more rigorous academic standards. The school counselor as part of the principal's educational team in the schools, has a vital role to play in supporting academic achievement by acting as a proactive leader and advocate for student success (Capuzzi 1998; House and Martin 1998; Lee and Walz 1998). Although the counselor and principal may have separate and specific roles and corresponding responsibilities to carry out, there is overlap with regard to accomplishing common goals for the school and its students. New attitudes about school counselors and principals joining forces for leadership and advocacy, can positively impact the mission and climate of the school in delivering academic success.

School systems and university educational leadership programs have responded to the

call for rigorous academic standards by examining and increasing standards of professional behavior and accountability for services to students (Mostert 1997). Slower to respond to the educational reform movement, school counseling pre-service and in-service programs are beginning to show signs of serious examination of the school counselors' role in actively promoting student academic success. Instead of being isolated in their offices, counselors need to play an integral role in the total educational process (Kaplan and Evans 1999; Myrick 1997; Tollerud and Nejedlo 1999). The current movement by the American School Counseling Association (ASCA) to establish school counseling standards is furthering the effort to bring counselors to the heart of the educational reform movement (Dahir, et al 1997). By viewing themselves as an integral part of the mission of schools and partnering with their school principals, counselors can empower themselves to seek new ways to benefit students' academic success (Worzby and Zook 1992). This article will outline the evolving leadership and advocacy roles of the school counselor in supporting the principal in the effort to move schools toward rigorous academic achievement for all and will examine the partnership efforts already underway by school counselors and principals throughout the nation.

Educational Reform

The report of the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) demonstrates that schools are not equipping students with the necessary higher level skills and half of America's youth are leaving school without the knowledge or foundation required to find and hold a good job (SCANS 1991). In response, major school reform efforts have focused on

setting more rigorous academic standards. But reform leaders have paid little attention to the partnership role school counselors can play with principals to promote rigorous academics for all students (House and Martin 1998; **need others too**). As we embrace the new millennium, the school counseling profession is taking stock of where it stands currently in the educational reform movement and is evaluating where it is headed in the future with regard to promoting high achievement levels for all students.

Educational Leadership

Leadership is becoming an increasingly valued and shared phenomenon at the school level. Although it begins with the principal, it should also include other players such as teachers, parents, students, the superintendent, and community members who contribute to making schools even better (NASSP 1996). Yet counselors and principals have not traditionally viewed themselves as partners in educational leadership.

For the school counselor, leadership has not been duly explored and emphasized in either practice or in school counseling preparation programs. Many counselors do not see themselves as educational leaders; however they have unique opportunities to assert leadership. School counselors exercise leadership through increased collaboration and consultation interventions with those significant people in the lives of students; teachers, administrators, family members and people in the community (Cooper and Sheffield 1994). The principal must take a stand on important educational issues to be perceived as a strong leader and an advocate for continuous school improvement, and it is becoming expected that the effective school counselor exercise the same leadership behaviors (**need some references here**). “Counselors need to be role models

and change agents which is more easily accomplished when they are seen in a leadership role in the schools. The more they are in the classrooms and working with teachers, parents, and administrators, the more credible they become” (Guerra 1998). Further, in partnering with the principal to provide leadership in working toward common goals, the counselor and principal can enhance each other’s influence while being perceived as a collaborative team, thus increasing the leadership potential of the school.

Leadership Through Advocacy

Educational reform coupled with widespread societal changes impacting schools are compelling reasons for principals and school counselors to join forces to positively intervene in the lives of their students and their environments. Thus, these educators can use their influence to eradicate systems and ideologies that have the potential to impact negatively upon students (House and Martin 1998; Lee and Walz 1998; Stone and Turba 1999). Helping to create alternatives and opportunities for people is one of the action steps that counselors can take. All people, particularly those who have been marginalized in society need more life choices (Lee and Walz 1998). Counselors and principals can advocate in numerous ways for students, particularly with regard to motivation, achievement, and future planning. To be seen as an advocate for “all students” is particularly important with regard to the perception of the counselor as an educational leader (House and Martin 1998). A number of specific areas in which counselors and principals can collaborate to demonstrate leadership and advocacy are outlined below.

_____ *Changing Attitudes and Beliefs*. The partnership between counselors and school

principals in changing attitudes and beliefs is particularly crucial. School counselors as human relations experts can impact the beliefs and attitudes of teachers and administrators regarding educating all students to achieve high standards. The school counselor collaborating with the principal can help establish a vision and belief in the development of high aspirations in every child. The counselor who believes that all children should be supported to be successful in rigorous academic course work, will act in ways that demonstrate that belief, influencing other educators (Handy 1987). The training counselors receive in communication, interpersonal relationships, problem solving and conflict resolution give them a vantage point in promoting collaboration among colleagues to promote such achievement (West and Idol 1993). Close communication and the coordination of efforts to improve and ensure student success are vital. Ideally, school principals and counselors should be seen as partners who work closely together. Cooper and Sheffield (1994) write of a collaborative management model where the principals' and counselors' roles are interchangeable allowing them to work together to impact attitudes and beliefs in each student's ability to learn, improve instruction and provide support in the classroom. Although this model is not yet implemented in many school settings, the principle of collaboration between school principals and counselors is being seen as increasingly necessary to the operation of an effective instructional program.

_____ *Developing High Aspirations in Students.* Counseling can help students develop high aspirations rather than just attending to aspirations as they may emerge. School counselors can positively impact students' desire to stretch and strive academically by helping them understand their choices and the full weight, and the meaning of those choices (**other references here**;

Stone and Turba 1999). Students need to understand the logic and interrelatedness of the curriculum and the consequences of academic choices. The school counselor as academic advisor to all students, can clearly communicate to students and their parents that academic choices widen or narrow future options and opportunities. The academic advising role includes helping students to register for appropriate courses, helping them understand the interrelationship between curriculum choices and future economic success, and helping them understand that financing a higher education is possible (**references**).

It is important for students and their parents to believe that college is a real possibility, financially as well as academically. Without this assurance, students may make curriculum choices that limit their aspirations. An example of helping students develop high aspirations can be found in the Duval County Public Schools in Jacksonville, Florida where students are informed as to available financial aid and scholarship opportunities. The school counselors in this district annually train approximately 100 volunteers who then deliver individual advising sessions to high schoolers about how to access financial aid and scholarships for postsecondary education (Stone and Turba 1999). Another example of advocacy for higher academic achievement can be found in a large urban school district which recently implemented a policy requiring all students to pass algebra to obtain a high school diploma. This new policy has mobilized the counselors to help change the attitudes and beliefs of teachers about math requirements for students. Armed with data about the success of similar programs in other school districts, these counselors were able to show how the percentage of students enrolling in and passing algebra had increased significantly. Passing algebra and other higher mathematics

prepares students for college admission which otherwise may have been denied to them.

_____ *Career Guidance*. The school counselor as academic advisor is ideally situated to act as an advocate in helping make students aware of as well as succeed in a rigorous academic program. Providing critical, timely information will result in more students stretching themselves and striving to enroll in the most appropriate academic course work. The National College Counseling Project (1986) stated, “outstanding counselors . . . consistently emphasize that their students have the potential to better themselves and to meet ambitious goals” (p.32).

Classroom guidance, a traditional school counselor intervention can be updated to be a vehicle for more direct advocacy for student success. Test preparation, study skills, educational and future planning, career development, and the use of specific data to further such topics can be used to encourage a positive “mindset” for achievement and success for all students (Clark and Stone 2000). Sharing statistics with students about the impact education has on lifetime salaries may encourage a higher degree of motivation and understanding of course relevancy than just presenting students with course sign up sheets to complete. Specific up to date information on what jobs and accompanying skills/training will be required in our future society is very important data for students as well as their parents to have (Clark and Stone 2000). As well as facilitating the large group sessions themselves, counselors can serve as consultants and resources for Teacher Advisor Programs which can disseminate similar types of information to students in an organized program with a planned curriculum (Myrick 1997).

Additionally, the use of technology for career and academic advising should be an integral part of the counselor-as-leader repertoire. Turba (1998) described technological skills

needed for the school counselor in career advising.

For counselors to perform their job functions adequately, at the minimum, they must possess basic computer literacy skills. This should include extensive knowledge of Internet resources, software that relates to career advising, distance learning, virtual activities such as chat rooms, discussion groups, listservers, using Internet video conferencing, constructing virtual guidance offices that help students access Internet resources, and the interest to stay current on the changing scene of computer technology (p.10).

_____ *Coursework Assignments.* School counselors in collaboration with principals, are ideally situated to positively impact opportunities for student course assignment into rigorous academic programs. Most educators recognize the American public education system as the mechanism in our society for upward mobility and is a basic right of all students. Yet, we are also aware that we have not achieved equity in academic advising or course assignment, and that not all students are sufficiently supported and challenged to reach their full academic potential. Course assignment contributes to the furthering or hindrance of educational opportunity. Teachers, and to a lesser degree school counselors, are placing students in course assignments that will widen or narrow future opportunities. Further, students are making decisions that are inconsistent with their future goals (Stone 1997).

The College Entrance Examination Board found that by tenth grade, only half of the ninth graders who said they were going to college were enrolled in courses that would qualify them for college entrance. Researchers have found that students from low-income families are less likely to

have access to course assignment guidance both at home and at school and that students from upper socioeconomic backgrounds tend to have more exploratory interviews with their counselors (Garza and McNeal 1988). Stratified learning opportunities contribute to the continuity of a stratified social order (George 1988; Rosenbaum 1987; Slavin 1987, 1988) and schools whose students are predominately white, middle-class, and relatively high achievers receive more opportunities for enriched and rigorous academic experiences (Gamoran 1986; Oakes 1997).

A 1995 study by Stone examined the mathematics placement of the ninth graders of one large urban school district. An analysis of the 1611 ninth-graders who scored in the upper quartile on one of three mathematics subtests, revealed that placement in higher level mathematics differed for upper quartile students depending on where the student went to school. In this school district, a student's future opportunities were stratified based on the attitudes and beliefs of the personnel and community of individual schools. Principals and counselors together can impact schools' practices which deter equity and adversely affect opportunities for the students of their schools. Together this powerful team can change enrollment patterns and implement safety nets for helping students be successful.

_____ *Data Analysis.* School counselors and principals who understand equity issues and have technological skills to aggregate and disaggregate student information, have critical, powerful skills that can allow them to act as advocates to identify and eliminate school practices that may be deterring equitable access and opportunities for student success in higher level academics. Using school district data, the principal/counselor team can identify through the use of technology, broad system-wide practices that contribute to inequitable situations for individual students. As a team, these two disciplines can manage and monitor patterns of enrollment and student success.

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Many school counselors have databases available that contain biographical information as well as scheduling, attendance, discipline, and test history. This information is useful in itself when working with students about any of the information contained in the database, such as attendance and past academic performance. The information in these databases can be exported to relational databases to provide more flexibility and increased accessibility to more student information.

For example, Duval County Public Schools in Jacksonville, Florida has initiated a computer training program called School Wide Assessment Through Technology (SWATT). This program provides to the principal, principal's designee, and counselor of every school in the county, data formatted into an integrated software program. The data consists of biographic information, attendance, test scores, and current grades. Within this program, forms, reports, and other useful data formats are included so that data can be easily accessed, printed, charted and used in a variety of ways that could benefit all students. By containing the data in this type of program, assurances are built into the system that no students are left out of the picture when viewing the data. This provides equity in analysis as well as in access to opportunities, and also guarantees that no group of students will be left out of calculations (Stone and Turba 1999).

An example of how these databases can be used to help students occurred when a Florida school counselor discovered that 47 students who took Spanish I in eighth grade were planning to enter his high school as ninth graders in the fall without plans to continue their Spanish education or any other foreign language instruction. Understanding the consequences of such a decision on postsecondary educational opportunities, this school counselor was able to quickly generate through mail merge, a letter to each of the 47 students explaining the ramifications of their decision and

inviting them to a group presentation about the relationship between curriculum enrollment and postsecondary opportunities. Instructions on how to change their schedules were included. Without data analysis, this counselor would have had to catch these students the second or third week into the school year and vital instruction time would have been lost. Further, classes are planned for and scheduled in advance based on course requests, so many of the students may not have been able to add the class at a later date.

Counselors can increase their visibility and empower their positions as leaders by demonstrating accountability and sharing pertinent data with students, teachers, parents, administrators and the community (Myrick 1997). Keeping records of students' educational and career decisions, enrollment and retention in higher education, school climate information, needs assessments, outcomes from various guidance and counseling interventions, case studies as well as publicizing such information with the current school population can enhance the counselors' position as a credible resource and leader. Such information can be shared through articles in local and school newspapers, presentations to student, parent and community groups, automatic dialer of the school telephone system, and a school guidance website (Clark and Stone 2000). If counselors systematically gather and analyze results of their work, ask for ideas for program improvement, and use this information to modify their services as appropriate, they will gain support, understanding and advocacy for their work (Humphrey and Myer 1994).

Staff Development. Collaborating with the principal to conduct in-service training for teachers and parents in such important areas as educational planning, motivation, student appraisal and achievement, identification of and interventions for special needs students, and issues of student

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diversity and related attitudes is an example of counselors teaming with the principal to play a unique role in fostering understanding and cooperation among the school community. Other examples of counselor facilitated staff development can include learning styles and strategies, student leadership training, school improvement plans, cooperative discipline and classroom management, study skills, and college admissions procedures. An ultimate goal is to assist the principal in providing support to teachers through information, intervention, modeling, and encouragement (Cooper and Sheffield 1994; Dedmond 1998).

One middle school counselor decided to try to address some student behavioral issues that frequently frustrated parents and teachers by organizing a Parent/Teacher Forum. She conducted a needs assessment and identified the most frequently occurring problems and concerns of educators and parents in her school such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), lack of study skills, underachievement, aggressive/defiant behavior, and substance abuse. She then organized and hosted a one night fair at the school in which parents and teachers were able to choose three different presentations to attend. Speakers were obtained from various community agencies to provide information and facilitate discussions on the topics of interest. The physical education coaches assisted in the endeavor by providing clinics in the multi-purpose room for children ages 6–16 while the adults were attending the workshops (Clark and Stone 2000).

Staff development took a different twist for the counselor and administrative staff of a large elementary school when they decided to address the stress level of their faculty following a particularly grueling spring testing schedule. During a planning day they set up wellness workshops in which teachers could attend lectures on nutrition, receive a massage, listen to a chiropractor, and

participate in a healthy, low-calorie lunch. Evaluations indicated that these workshops were well received and contributed to an increase in faculty morale during a difficult period of the school year.

Collaboration and Team Building. Institutions do not change unless leaders within them initiate and implement team building for change. Counselors are in a strategic position to collaborate with the principal to promote the change process in school reform. As part of leadership team as well as being trained facilitators, counselors can provide technical and staff support to facilitate change efforts and team building within a school and community (Sheldon 1998). Further, with their specialized knowledge and skills in collaboration, coordination, cooperation, resource brokering, and assessment and evaluation, counselors can be leaders in policy and process changes that can affect education and student achievement (Dedmond 1998). Specific organizational roles that a counselor may choose to play can include participation and leadership in school and district committees on school improvement, student assessment, enrichment programs, management advisory committees, curriculum committees, and parent-teacher organizations. Heading up school groups/teams, and taking a stand on important issues will further a leadership image and will empower the counselor to help the principal (Clark and Stone 2000). Collaboration in home-school partnerships is another area of opportunity for the principal/school counselor team. Individual students do better if their parents are involved in their education and home-school partnerships also increases the overall effectiveness of a school (Keenan, Willett, and Solsken 1993).

As the school leaders of the Child Study Team, the counselor and principal partnership can help teachers, school psychologists, and other resource personnel collaborate to identify and resolve student problems by designing the most appropriate and innovative program or instructional

modifications. Child Study Teams, the mechanisms for handling special education referrals, can be a means to advocate for appropriate interventions outside of special education thus, curbing the over identification of students for special education (Clark and Stone 2000).

Promoting a Safe Learning Environment. Essential in today's rapidly changing society is collaboration on the part of the counselor with the principal, teachers, and parents to help individual students and classroom groups communicate regarding multicultural awareness and understanding. Further, by teaching communication skills and emphasizing the valuing of differences, counselors can work with teachers to help children learn to convey caring and respect for one another. Our public schools continue to reflect an increasingly diverse population. It is essential that school counselors and principals work as a team to embrace cultural diversity for students, teachers, parents, and members of the community (Harris 1999). Championing multiculturalism and challenging intolerance are roles for the counselor as leader and advocate (Grieger and Ponterotto 1998; Ponterotto 1991; Ponterotto and Pedersen 1993).

For example, in July 1999, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Eleventh Circuit ruled in *Denno v. School Board of Volusia County, Florida*, that students have the right to display symbols in schools, even if the symbols evoke unpleasantness such as the confederate flag. The school counselor can be in a pivotal position to help the principal diffuse negative feelings aroused by such displays, as well as teach and promote tolerance if a school faces overt problems or even more subtle, insidious prejudice. Counselors teaming with principals can help teachers recognize what is involved in teaching a diverse population, encourage them to become more knowledgeable about other cultures, and assist them in examining their own beliefs, values, and prejudices (Harris 1999; Lee 1995;

Ponterotto and Pedersen 1993).

School counselors are ideally situated to collaborate with the school principals to promote an emotionally and physically safe environment so that all students can concentrate on academic achievement. For example, sexual harassment once regarded as innocuous horseplay is now widely understood to be destructive, illegal, and a hindrance to student's ability to benefit from the educational environment. School counselors are the logical choice to collaborate with principals to establish and implement a "no tolerance" policy for sexual harassment.

Conclusion

The time has come for school counselors to join forces with the school principal to assume and exert leadership within their schools and communities. Educational reform and numerous societal changes have both contributed to the need for a shift in the role of the school counselor to educational leader who establishes a vision and belief in the development of high aspirations for every child. Opportunities for leadership through social action and collaboration through increased community involvement and improved communication are natural roles for the counselor. Many counselors are already beginning to team with principals in a variety of the activities and strategies described in this article. What remains is for counselors to view themselves as natural allies with the school's leadership and to look for opportunities to develop and implement their special leadership skills in order to maximize their effectiveness in the promotion of success for all students.

We are faced with a need to prepare all students for a society that will be unlike any that has come before us. The school counselor joining forces with the principal can ensure that all students have access to the information and experiences that will allow them to influence the society of the

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future. Such a leadership team is ideally situated to advocate for all students by providing academic advising and support to encourage them to obtain the best possible education as the gateway to greater social and economic opportunities in their futures.

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